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On Yannara's Questioning of the Western Reception of the Modern *Philokalia*: The Primacy of the Ecclesial

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1.

Considered by Father Andrew Louth as constituting a "watershed" in the history of Modern Orthodox thought,[1] the *Philokalia*, especially the one prepared and edited by Saint Nicodemos of the Holy Mountain, encounters surprisingly stern resistance in the thinking of Christos Yannaras. The basis of the complaint lies precisely, as we shall see somewhat extensively below, in its complicity with modern habits of mind. What Louth means by "modern" in regard to an important set of Orthodox authors, including Yannaras himself, is different than that to which the latter's critique refers. Louth has in mind a time period within the historical framework for Orthodox thought, namely, from the end of the 18th century and throughout the 20th, in which

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1. Andrew Louth, *Modern Orthodox Theology: From the Philokalia to the Present,* (London: SPCK, 2015), 1.

it gained a new impetus with the publication of the *Philokalia*.[2] It so happened that the renewed interest in the thinking of Saint Gregory Palamas gradually emerged in conjunction with the interest in Saint Nicodemos' edition of the *Philokalia*. Norman Russell reminds us that Nikodomos had it in mind to publish the entirety of Gregory Palamas' works in Vienna but was prevented in doing so by pressure applied by the Ottomans on the Austrian authorities. Thus, "The Greek-speaking world had to wait until the twentieth century before it was able to re-appropriate Palamite teaching."[3]

Thematically speaking, there is nothing radically new added by Palamas' texts to the anthology. Readers interested in the practice of the Jesus Prayer and hesychasm would have found material concerning them in many of the contributions, preceding those of Palamas. As an illustration of this, the Russian reception of the *Philokalia*, made available through the efforts of Paisii Velichkovsky (1722-1794), did not include any text of Gregory Palamas. He would only become an object of study for the Russians nearly a century later, when hesychasm, along with the associated themes of divine light and divine names, became important to them. In the meantime, the Russian version had considerable

2. It would be good to bear in mind the existence of the more original *Philokalia*, composed by Saints Basil the Great and Gregory Nazianzus in the Fourth Century on the basis of selected texts of Origen. The "modern" version ignores Origen, but does contain the important contribution of Evagrius, who learned much from Origen and has had a permanent influence on the monastic tradition of the East.
3. Norman Russell, *Gregory Palamas and the Making of Palamism in the Modern Age*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 6. It is also worth noting that references to the Barlaam controversy was omitted in the selection of texts from the Palamite opus. Saint Nicodemos' purposes were clearly irenic.

influence on its own and, one can say, continued success in the worldwide readership that learned of the *Philokalia* from *The Way of the Pilgrim*. Tributary to this influence are the references to both works in J.D. Salinger's popular novel, *Franny and Zooey* in the 1950's, and, curiously, a means by which many Western readers at that time had their initial introduction to Orthodox spirituality. Nevertheless, this convergence had the effect of demonstrating the potential of hesychasm to present itself as the high road into Christian life. Provocative and consequent in its magnified appreciation of human being's capacity for God, it affirms the ontological content of Christian revelation as ultimately mystical and transforming. In principle, readers of *The Philokalia* would see the texts comprising it as positively contributing to life in Christ thus understood: the teachings communicate, with detail and precision, the art of self-transcendence in prayer, sustained by the movement of the Spirit in the heart of the faithful follower of Christ, perfected in the ascetic discipline intent on practicing the presence of God. All of which would seem apposite to the concern of believers to align their spiritual struggle in accordance with the strenuous, yet liberating commandments of Christ. All of this would also find an echo of such in Palamite doctrine.

Yannaras' questioning of the Western reception of the modern *Philokalia* neither disputes the import of these practical virtues for the cultivation of prayer life, nor the quality of the writings, nor, for certain, the significance of Palamas for Orthodox theology. However, contrary to the general tendency to look upon the work and Nicodemos' editorship with benevolence, he deems that, instead of drawing nearer to the experience and spirit of the apostolic Church and creedal determinations of the first eight centuries of our era, it unwittingly contributes to the furthering

of Orthodoxy's "captivity" to Western conceptions of an acceptable Christianity. Among the consequences, he will argue, it manages to obscure the catholicity that properly belongs to the Eastern Church by marginalizing the Hellenic mode of thinking that coheres *ab initio* with her reality and persists still in the Greek people. The fuller scope of what is in play for Yannaras makes itself manifest in an intriguing response given to Russell when recently interrogated about whether or not contemporary Greece should remain in the European Union:

> If I insist that in spite of everything we should remain in the European Union, it is because I believe that Hellenism ceases to exist if it does not participate, as a proposition of culture, in the historical process. And it is only by participating in the contemporary global tragedy of the collapse of Western cultural paradigm (of individualism and naturalism) can Hellenism, perhaps, remerge from its habitual recycling of second hand ideas and mimicking of the West and rediscover its historical role: to be the critic and creative challenger of the culture of the West.[4]

Like the hesychast spirituality that was spawned within the Hellenised world that became Christian, a non-dialecticallly positioned mode of living in accordance with the uncreated and

4. Christos Yannaras and Norman Russell, *Metaphysics as a Personal Adventure* (Yonkers, N.Y.: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2017), 150. In his *Postmodern Metaphysics*, Yannaras give us further evidence about what he is targeting: the eudaemonistic tendency intrinsic to the life of modern parliamentary democracy, for it "excludes any ontological conception of politics, any pursuit of existential authenticity; the ancient Greek postulate that political 'truth' is to be identified with 'society' and the Christian ideal of the communion of persons, 'imaging' the Triadic Archetype of true life, are both absent." *Postmodern Metaphysics,* translated by Norman Russell (Brookline, Ma.: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2004), 13.

all-embracing logos needs to exist and persist prophetically as a permanent reminder of the fallen character of a fractured humanity that only in name claims to be one and universal. This would be the West.

Yannaras' questioning of the project associated with this *Philokalia* is marked by a strong bias that is at once personal and cultural. Biases are what they are and need to be recognized as such, and we shall, in due time, offer some corrective comments both in regard to the anthology and to the person of Saint Nicodemos. Nevertheless, the peculiar angle with which he approaches his subjects has the virtue of liberating the mind to look at Orthodox Christianity afresh. Notably, it is governed by a wish to see the Church grounded ontologically on the eucharistic event and the catholicity of the communion that it engenders. But, as we have just seen, there is the persistent struggle throughout to come to terms with "the West," understood as more than a geographical qualification but a constructed cultural enterprise with global ambition that rests uncomfortably with the Christian faith as the Orthodox conceive and profess it.

Heidegger's influence on Yannaras is well-known and confessed. Later on, we shall return to aspects of this influence, together with its Palamite inflection. These provide, ultimately, the realist basis for the relational ontology that Yannaras proposes as the legitimate Orthodox alternative to Heidegger's consequent nihilist proposal. Again, in conversation with Russell,

> My own motive was to reply to Heidegger's challenge. It was a challenge that concerned our existential problem: Heidegger's existential nihilism summarized a directly experienced empirical reality that was definitive of the life of modern humanity. [...] I

> believe that I had to investigate and find out whether the tradition of ecclesial experiential witness had a reply to Heidegger's nihilism.[5]

This existential mode of questioning is worth appreciating, for it reveals the terms that are structurally operative in Yannaras' anxiety for authenticity in matters of faith in the following passage from his Forward to *Orthodoxy and the West* and has much to do with his own personal "Being there" (*Dasein*):

> As a modern Greek, I myself embody both the thirst for what is 'right' and the reality of what is 'wrong': a contradictory and alienated survival of ecclesiastical Orthodoxy in a society radically and unhappily Westernised. My critical stance towards the West is self-criticism; it refers to my own wholly Western mode of life.
> I am a Western person searching for answers to the problems tormenting Western people today. The threat to the environment, the assimilation of politics to business models, the yawning gulf between society and the state, the pursuit of ever-greater consumption, the loneliness and weakness of social reforms, the prevailing loveless sexuality – all these seem to go back to the theological differences that once provoked the 'Schism' dividing Christendom into two. Today's individualism and absolute utilitarianism appear to have theological origins.[6]

Yannaras' critique of the *Philokalia* can only be made sense of within the economy of his own attempt to think through the dilemma of an Orthodox Christian believer immersed in a social reality entirely committed to a de-ontologised secular and global-

5. *Metaphysics as a Personal Adventure*, 124.
6. Christos Yannaras, *Orthodoxy and the West: Hellenic Self-Identity in the Modern Age*, translated by Peter Chamberas and Norman Russell (Brookline, Ma.: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2006), ix.

ised political agenda, subsumed under the category of the "West." For him, the situation has been shaped in a decisive way with the occurrence of the "Schism" that divided the Christian world. Therein lies, for him, the sphere of interrogation that demands clarification, not only for his own sake, but also as a hermeneutical key for understanding the drift of human history and its inherent tensions.

On the basis of the passage above and in anticipation of what we shall thematically develop in the following sections, the following reconstructive paraphrase may serve as guide for both the direction of Yannaras' thinking and the backdrop for his complaint concerning Nicodemos' *Philokalia*. In so doing, we intentionally add elements of his philosophical theology that were not mentioned as yet, but will have a significant place in what we shall encounter later on. Yannaras believes:

a. What is right is found in the Greek Orthodox Church into which he was baptised and in which he faithfully remains. The thirst for rightness inheres in his Hellenic tradition. that offered to the emerging Christian Church the conceptual guidelines and exigency that is appropriate to the universal reach of the salvation revealed and accomplished in Christ. As one attentive to the Hellenic ethos from which he cannot separate himself, he implicitly yearns for this truth, found and, in principle, cultivated in Orthodox Christianity, not in terms of a distinctive religion, but as an "ecclesia." This constitutes a new mode of human existence characterised by a common struggle to conjugate right-thinking and practices with the overcoming of death and decay, namely, personal immortality.

b. What is right appears paradoxically "wrong" within the horizon of Western civilisation that has established a contrary set of criteria

for rightness, manifesting itself with clarity from the time of the Schism. The ecclesiastical reality, initially established in accordance with the vectors of a Christianised Hellenism,[7] has largely ceased to represent the *locus* of transformative sacramental living capable of regenerating a fractured humanity that is always already called to participative communion in Christ's Body, the Church.

c. The Orthodox Church gradually acquired a deviant status in relation to ordinary life as defined by the culture of the West; her questions pertaining to the salvation of humankind through the grace of eucharistic communion were replaced by the universalisation of dilemmas, derived through ontologically unhinged discursivity, nominalist in character and motivated by self-will and utilitarian principles. The relevance of the Church and her catholicity can be achieved by conjugating the overcoming of forgetfulness of the Church as originally ecclesial event with the undoing of derivative forms of ecclesiastical life that have assumed idolatrous status within it. The lasting ontology will be, in the end, Hellenic and ecclesial in nature.

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7. We intentionally avoid using Father George Florovsky's famous expression, "Christian Hellenism." By it, he wishes to accentuate the patristic way of creatively redeploying Greek concepts for Christian usage and maintaining its potential to render intelligible what is universally shared in the human experience of the world. That is all to the good. But, in spite of obvious points of convergence, Yannaras' approach is not quite the same. His insistence on the "Hellenic," or simply, "Greek," gives more explicit import to, the pre-Christian Hellenic wisdom that would be eminently useful to the early Church's organization in safe-guarding a universal perspective. Yannaras gives a nod of appreciation to the Fathers, especially Saints John of Damascus, Maximus the Confessor, and Gregory Palamas,but is not as fixed on them as Florovsky is. However, more importantly, whereas Florovsky incites, in a vague way, Orthodox Christian thinkers to be creative in accordance with the patristic *phronema*, Yannaras exemplifies – to his credit – how it can actually and competently be done in the contemporary context.

While expressly reflecting Yannaras' personal experience, the terms of the problematic as he lives it do indeed raise questions about the West and the subsequent effects of the Schism. He deems rightly that they have wider civilizational implications, revealing a fundamental tension between the demands of an original matrix of life in common, exemplified in the ecclesial experience, and the largely nominalist appropriation and distortion of what properly pertains to the ontological bonds of the former. This is where the specific questioning of the Western reception of Saint Nicodemos' *Philokalia* situates itself.

2.

Looking back on the "Philokalic Renaissance," particularly on how it emerged in the context of the mid-twentieth century encounter between theologically gifted Russian *emigrés* in Paris and major Roman Catholic thinkers of the period, Yannaras recognizes the potential it had for producing a positive change that could affect the two sides of the equation.

> This diaspora became the occasion for a dynamic awakening of the alienated Orthodox conscience, the first since the fourteenth century, a real (and not ideological) confrontation of Orthodoxy with the West. The surprising unexpectedness of this awakening provoked important developments more broadly in Western communions, such as the active interest of mainly Roman Catholic theologians in the study of the Greek Fathers, Orthodox worship, and Orthodox art.[8]

8. Christos Yannaras, *Against Religion: The Alienation of the Ecclesial Event* translated by Norman Russell (Brookline: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2013), 189. The

But it is the "reality," understood by Yannaras as something having ontological weight, namely, as having a genuine impact on the life of the Christian Church, of the confrontation that did not truly happen. Still, nominally speaking, it did have, he believes, the good effect of stimulating the already growing interest in patristic literature, including the Greek Fathers, on the part of Catholic thinkers who would figure prominently in the initial hopes of the Second Vatican Council. At the very least, Eastern Christianity offered, as Yannaras himself acknowledges, the Western Church something to think about, appreciate, and possibly accommodate to some degree. However, what concerns Yannaras more especially is that the encounter offered "the occasion for a dynamic awakening of the alienated Orthodox conscience, the first since the fourteenth century," namely, since the time of Gregory Palamas. Again, the alienation in question consists in the degree to which Western ecclesiastical habits have, surreptitiously, entered those of the Orthodox and have influenced how they conceive their Church. We shall return to aspects of this problematic below. But for the moment, let us recognize with Yannaras the historical importance of this particular phase of the 20th century. To begin with, from the vantage point of an emblematic centre of Western culture such as Paris, it represents an opportunity to reconsider what the historical path of the Eastern Church up until the present. In addition, it served to review her priorities in the light of the apostolic witness of faith, as expressed in Scripture, and in the unceasing

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Roman Catholic theologians in question were those associated with *La nouvelle théologie* and the re-rooting of Catholic theology in the patristic experience. Among the most prominent were Henri de Lubac, Jean Danielou, and Yves Congar. Some were present at the conferences proffered by Vladimir Lossky and that became the substance of latter's ground-breaking, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*.

task of edifying the Church through mutual self-giving and corporative thanksgiving. In respect to these specific matters, Yannaras finds the modern *Philokalia* and Saint Nicodemos' efforts frankly unhelpful. Instead of reflecting the existential struggle, the adventure and quest for the wholeness of Christ, the anthologised writings of monastic authors, spanning a thousand years from Isaiah the Solitary and Evagrius to Palamas, lend themselves to an ideological reading. Contemplated apart from the Church in which they were effectively cultivated, the content of the spiritual teachings are decontextualized. As Yannaras sees it, this mode of presenting them would appeal to the religious nominalism of Western Christianity: the selective, individualised appropriation of what they have to say, a habit by now effectively assimilated by Orthodox people who have simply succumbed to the ideologization of their ecclesial tradition. The Orthodox Church would have their own "religionised" form of Christianity amongst others.

> We Orthodox like to accuse the West of institutional rigidity and of imposing religionalisation on the ecclesial event, of submitting it to intellectualism, moralism and legalism. But the case of the *Philokalia* proves rather that the West is 'within us' – its historical outgrowths dwell in an obscure way in the 'inward' instinctive need of every human being for individualistic self-protection and assurance."[9]

Yannaras' critical allusions to the *Philokalia* appear in important places in his work and their relative frequency suggests that it represents an alarming symptom of where the Orthodox people find themselves without taking much notice of it. This would

9. Christos Yannaras, *Against Religion*, 196.

include Saint Nicodemos himself. Notably, in *Orthodoxy and the West,* he dedicates pages that cast doubt over the clear-mindedness, not to mention the wisdom, of his canonization to sainthood, of Nicodemos the Hagiorite.

> What I call the 'West,' the 'religionising' of ecclesial reality, its transformation into self-centred moralism with legalistic presuppositions, is a spiritual failure not confined to Western Europe; it is exemplified by St. Nikodemos of the Holy Mountain. The West has shadowed the developing Christian conscience throughout the centuries up to contemporary pietism and puritanism. In Western Europe, ecclesial reality was transformed [...] and institutionalized without resistance; this transformation was also sometimes present in the East, as Nikodemos's official recognition and canonization implies.[10]

Nicodemos unwittingly would have, then, lanced his Orthodox Church deeper into the predicament of her alienation; Eastern Christianity continues bound by presuppositions that have found their way into its theology from Protestant and Roman Catholic origins. Moreover, in the kind of general editorial project, beyond the *Philokalia* as such, that Nicodemos endeavoured to achieve, Yannaras accuses him of gathering together and putting on the same plane spiritualities of the East and the West.

As Yannaras presents it, from the perspective of work's reception in the West, unencumbered by historical references to doctrinal and political disputes that were all too constant in the successive phases in the Church of the Eastern Roman Empire, modern Western Christians might appreciate the detailed explorations of questing after God provided by exemplary and somewhat ideal-

10. Christos Yannaras , *Orthodoxy and West,* 137.

ized figures of Eastern monasticism. Immersed in market oriented societies where freedom is confounded with choice, seekers of an alternative spirituality might read selectively what might be helpful to them over against the excessively juridical and moralistic forms of Christianity that constitute a part of their cultural inheritance. But, however critical he may be about Western Christianity, his ultimate concern is the degree to which Orthodox believers adopt like attitudes even in regard to emblematic aspects of the Byzantine past.[11] What matters most is the lack of reference to the eucharistic body, to the Church, in the *Philokalia*, leaving the impression that the individual practice of asceticism and the prayer of the heart is sufficient for salvation. His wish is to situate his own Church within the fertile and ontologically secure cradle of her apostolic origins, conjoined with the Hellenic sense of wholeness that the Fathers knew how to explore for the sake of ecclesial catholicity.

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11. In *The Journals of Father Alexander Schmemann,* we find a similar critique, and Father Alexander directs it also ultimately toward the Orthodox themselves: "All this rushing about, either to Byzantium, or to the *Philokalia*, or to the island of Patmos, or to icons, makes Orthodoxy look like a supermarket. Each chooses what he wants: the era, the style and identification. [...] Sometimes I see Orthodoxy in a thicket of idols. To be attached to the past always leads to idolatry, and I see many people living by the past, or rather many pasts." *The Journals of Father Alexander Schmemann 1973-1983* translated by Juliana Schmemann (Crestwood: Saint Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2000), 18. Although their respective ways of theologizing differ greatly, Schmemann and Yannaras share common criticisms about "religion" and the potentially idolatrous aspects of "Orthodoxism."

3.

In defence of the *Philokalia* and of Saint Nicodemos, it could be argued that readers, even Western readers, Orthodox or not, of the work would have no difficulty in postulating that the texts have behind them a common ecclesiological tradition. Whether or not they would be willing to look more deeply into it and come to an understanding of the ecclesial reality that sustains the ascetic life of prayer proposed in the writings is another, albeit crucial, question; it would tacitly involve the confronting the issue of the religionization of the Christian Gospel that Yannaras sees as affecting the Church, both East and West. For our part, we could add to this the temptation to see Orthodoxy in terms of a Christian orientalism with mystical tonalities, spiritually comparable with Buddhist questing for insight and illumination beyond secularised immanence. Together with this, and not unlike the anti-modernist movements in the West that harken back to the imagined coherence of high medieval culture, represented theologically in the achievement of Thomas Aquinas, the desire for religious and political integrity might find inspiration in the Byzantine synthesis. However, that being the case, the genuine relevance of such an attraction ought to be in the circumventing the intellectualist premises of the theology of the Latin Church in favour of an ecclesio-centric theology grounded and inspired in Orthodox liturgical and devotional practices.

In any event, besides the common sense argument that the spiritual fathers who authored the texts would have a shared vision of the Church, Krastu Banev argues with pertinence that, together with the "implicit ecclesiology" that the *Philokalia* presupposes, there is also an "explicit" one that can be found occasionally in the work, namely, those of Abba Philimon, Peter of Damascus and

Symeon the New Theologian.[12] Clearly, Yannaras overlooked, or, more likely, did not consider the instances raised by Banev sufficiently weighty to overturn his objections. Banev did, expressly, have Yannaras, as well as Schmemann, in mind in writing his defense of the *Philokalia*'s ecclesiological dimension and, though only briefly, remarked that Yannaras' views are rooted in a process of self-criticism, through which he recognizes the problematic of modern and contemporary Orthodoxy.[13] As we have been noticing above, this is rightly seen. Nevertheless, our contention is that Yannaras' questioning ultimately has more theological substance than the complaint of contemplating the *Philokalia* as a coherent whole apart from the Church. It has to do with the refiguring the Church as ecclesial event in the image of the apostolic Church and beyond the constraints of modernity. The ultimate question is whether and how the *Philokalia* can positively contribute to the refiguration. But before working toward that end, there is yet another aspect of Yannaras' biased approach that needs corrective mentioning, namely, the subject of Saint Nicodemos himself and what he had effectively achieved.

Although criticised by Yannaras for the idea, Nicodemos' sense of mission did, indeed, lead him to to translate key texts from the Latin tradition with the thought that they would be beneficial to Orthodox readers as well. According to George Bebis, the Saint did so, but he also meliorated and enlarged them in order to bring the works into alignment with the spirituality of the Eastern Church. Citing as an example Nicodemos' translation of Ignatius

12. Krastu Banev, "The Ecclesiology of the Philokalia," in *The Philokalia: A Classic Text of Orthodox Spirituality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 163-171. See, http://dro.dur.ac.uk/8860/1/8860.pdf
13. Ibid., 3.

Loyola's *Spiritual Exercises,* Bebis defends the practice, saying that he,

> [...] expanded the original, which was only 30 pages, to a voluminous book of 650 pages. It is composed of thirty-four meditations on various subjects concerning man's salvation and his spiritual perfection. Then there are thirty brief meditations, each one designated for a month, followed by eight exercises of self-examination. In addition, there are eight uplifting spiritual readings. [...] the book has been adorned, corrected, amplified, and illustrated by St. Nicodemos himself; thus one may justifiably say it is a personal achievement exhibiting St. Nicodemos' profound involvement, study, and total grasp of the mind of the Fathers.[14]

Bebis considers the end result at once an exemplary exposition of Orthodox spirituality and edifying contribution for the faith of Christian people. Moreover, Nicodemos' fidelity to the Fathers, as well as his humility, manifests itself in the way his own teaching continues the expository genre of the holy monastics that contributed to the *Philokalia*. Like them, he sought in the words of his predecessors supportive confirmations of a traditional wisdom which needs to be communicated, again and again, for the edification of those who wish to unite their lives with that of God. Around his comments on "the perpetual memory of the Name of Jesus," he makes the following confession:

> I have said these things to you out of the abundant love which I have for your salvation. All of these things, like a parrot, I have learned well out of the sacred books of the God-inspired Fathers

14. Nicodemos of the Holy Mountain*, A Handbook of Spiritual Counsel* (translated by Peter Chamberas, (Paulist Press: New York, 1989), 39.

> and have heard through the living voice of certain spiritual fathers who have in part experienced these things. Because of my own laxity and my passions, I have not been able to learn any of these things through my own experience.[15]

To these pious words, we could add, on the basis of the latter chapters of his spiritual handbook, the care Nicodemos took to council bishops about being well prepared in the study of Scripture.

Thus, together with his concern for the life of prayer, Saint Nicodemos' dedication to the Church and Holy Tradition can surely be defended, and, now having done so, we may be clearer about what is most relevant in the difficulty that Yannaras recognizes in the reception of the modern *Philokalia*: the work's popularity, even among Orthodox readers, obfuscates the apostolic exigency to live in ecclesial communion, underestimating thereby the decisive formative dimension that it possesses for "growth in live, faith, and spiritual understanding." For Yannaras, the philosophical theologian, this implies finding his way back – again, in Heideggerian fashion – to the original ontological question persistently, perhaps willingly, forgotten: not the one about the meaning of being against the backdrop of nothingness as it is for Heidegger; it is rather about the primacy of relationality, eminently expressed by communal participation in the Church's sacramental life, the originating source and support of communication with the Triadic God, who Himself is in search of those who move towards Him. For Heidegger, the destiny of the West is set in its course by the progressive transformation of the ontological by the ontic and self-determining autonomous subjectivity. He sees the movement mirrored in how the philosophic life has been

15. Ibid., 169.

experienced over the centuries: from the more poetic and cosmological Pre-Socratic philosophers to the more technical ways of philosophizing already exemplified in Aristotle's work and continued into the technological age.[16] From Yannaras' Hellenic and Orthodox perspective, the issue lies more truly in the prioritizing of modes of thinking and acting in accordance with the atomic and created instead of those that accentuate the precedence of wholeness, grounded in the uncreated. For this reason, the West and the Schism become the pivotal themes for the rethinking of ontology in non-nihilist terms. Because these themes constitute tacitly the more recent setting by which the modern *Philokalia qua* work has been received, there it is all the more pertinent that the originating ecclesial experience be recalled to explicate the ecclesiological conditions that validate the catholicity of the ascetic writings as they appear in the work.

4.

In regard to the Fall of Constantinople (1453), made more possible in the wake of the Schism (more or less definitive in 1054), Yannaras notes that "the axis of development shifted decisively from the Greek East to the European West." This means that an alternative habit of mind took hold of the human hope of salvation in opposition not only to the Greek-speaking Roman East but also of the premodern social and economic structures in (what we call) l the medieval times. "[It has become] an all-embracing mental outlook and way of life. Modern people doubt the absolute

16. For a succinct rendering of Heidegger's thinking on this, see, *What is Philosophy?* Translated by Kluback and Wilde (Albany: NCUP, 1956).

worth of what has been handed down, all established criteria or any validation derived from antiquity."[17] In *The Schism of Philosophy*, which can be read as a companion book with *Orthodoxy and the West*, Yannaras looks more explicitly at the civilizational anteriority of the Hellenic notion of *Logos* as providing the more correct criterion of truth: a shared experience that is verified in common. This axiomatic postulating of a noetic wholeness provides the existential context for ontological participation. At issue is the desire for truth that also cultivates belonging to that which presents itself as a Before that is radically given and the sacral root of universal meaning for human being. Thus, for Yannaras "For a human settlement to exist, a *sacred sign* needs to be established within the space, an axis or centre of settlement. Cohabitation is a result of a common reference to this sacred sign that unifies life. The centre of settlement is the axis of life in its universality [...]."[18] Besides providing an outline of how the local can represent the universal, e.g., how the local parish can participate in the catholicity of the universal Church, Yannaras underscores that, for the Hellenic mind, a implicit relational ordering is operative in the establishing of meaning within a common space and in the structuring of wider considerations on the nature of human being and his place in the cosmos. Thus, if indeed salvation comes from the Jews, it is, for him, equally true that the historical Church gradually gained its form among the Hellenised Gentiles, who found in Christian *kerygma* the kind of "ontology" that attracted them: a common

17. Christos Yannaras, *Postmodern Metaphysics,* 1.
18. Christos Yannaras, *The Schism in Philosophy: The Hellenic Perspective and its Western Reversal* translated by Norman Russell (Brookline, Ma.: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2015), 3.

participation in a causal principle, the Truth, that identifies existence as a call, or invitation, to freedom in divine life.

To recuperate this sense that the modern Greeks have forgotten, Yannaras would reach back to Heraclitus and forward to Saint Gregory Palamas to underscore the continuity that existed in that regard, but also the difference that distinguishes the pagan version from the Christian one.

> But for the Greeks from Heraclitus to Gregory Palamas, knowledge is guaranteed by the immediacy of our relation with what exists and is real, since the relation sums up the many epistemological possibilities of an empirical approach to reality. For the ancient Greeks relationship was a concept (or logos) necessarily subject to the given rational necessity of cosmic harmony and order (which neither gods nor men could transcend) – to the universal common order. The Christian Greeks, however, experienced relationship as the preservation of the dynamic indeterminacy of personal freedom and otherness – the only given logos being the manifestation of a personal God and the human person in the specific ways freedom works.[19]

From within the continuity of the Greek conviction about the immediacy of relational participation in a shared reality, the first Christian apologists grafted into it a rule of thought that subverted, metaphysically speaking, the cosmic presuppositions of pagan thought. At the end of the day, it may not be necessarily the case that the human mind and will be confronted by a cosmic order governed, albeit harmonious and capable of inspiring wonder, by indifferent necessity to which it must, *amor fatum*, conform. For the Christian Church, the cosmos can provoke contemplative

19. Christos Yannaras, *Orthodoxy and the West*, 66.

wonderment, but it carries with itself the conviction that all of what is beheld in the cosmos is contingent on the will of a Creator God, whose freedom is powerfully demonstrated in the coming of the Incarnate Word to which the Church gives witness as having actually happened in the course of history.

> The fundamental starting point of the Christian gospel is the fact of the *incarnation of God*. If this refers to a true historical fact, then ancient Greek ontology is clearly overturned: if God can also exist as human being without ceasing to be God – if he can really *be* human and not merely *appear* to be so – then the existence of God is demonstrated to be free from logical prescriptions of essence or nature.[20]

In accordance with the theistic metaphysics, grounded in the experience of the Church, conformity to the order of reality would have distinctly different contours, just as the meaning, i.e., the logos, of "the universal common order" will have: it will, hereafter, consist in the struggle to relate and participate in the living, personal, self-giving (kenotic) logos. The achievement of Christianised Hellenism rests on recreating, in the light of the Incarnate Word, the communal mode of Greek thought in conjunction with Judaic patterns of worship. Thus, right-thinking receives an ecclesio-centric orientation, in which ontology acquires an existential character, accentuating the effort desirous to relate meaningfully with the uncreated energies that have their origin in God who is love.

However, over against this mode of ontological thinking in the Christian East, another mode of thought more "atomic" and individualistic, namely, "Western" and thereby schismatic, grad-

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20. Christos Yannaras, *Relational Ontology* translated by Norman Russell (Brookline, Ma.: Holy Cross Orthodox College, 2011), 50-51.

ually challenged the emphasis on commonality predominant in the Hellenic world. Over time, these two modes of philosophising become general categories that are ultimately not limited to geographical spheres; they are distinctive ways of conceiving life and death, the destiny of human being. Thus, the Greek modality that inspires Yannaras is constituted around a common struggle for a transcendental truth that is radically given and communicates to the interrogating mind the vectors of right-thinking and right-praxis that are appropriate to human being and in accordance with the uncreated.

Surely, the writings of the *Philokalia* imply full conformity with this emphasis on the primacy of the uncreated. Yet as they are presented in the anthology, it is hardly evident for Yannaras that the authors drew their love for Christ/ God from communion in the Body of the Church. The authors may be read and admired – especially among Orthodox Christians – as wise spiritual fathers in which they find inspired thoughts, leaving them nevertheless unconnected, or to some extent sanitised, from the hard and persistent ascetic efforts to attain and remain meaningfully, co-participating with others who share in the struggle. In this as well, Schmemann accompanies Yannaras. In an entry from his *Journals,* Father Alexander notes, "Once Father John Meyendorff told me in a moment of candour that he cannot understand why people are obsessed with the Fathers. So many people propagate this fashion, which prevents them from understanding anything in the real world, and are at the same time convinced that they serve the Church and Orthodoxy."[21] It is rather the existential character

21. Alexander Schmemann, *Journals*, 269.

of shared, hard-won belonging to Christ in truth and in freedom that Yannaras wishes to recuperate as authentically Orthodox.

In contrast, the Western modality will come to progressively accentuate immanent autonomy for its rational prerogatives, achieving its inner-logic of emancipation with insistence on rights, buoyed with the advances of technology and guiding these for the satisfaction of human desiring for pleasure, self-preservation, and lust for power.[22] At bottom, the historical Schism is but a reflection of a permanent temptation to dilute, if not actually eliminate the newness of the Christian *kerygma*, the wholeness of the salvation it promises, reverting thereby to the dichotomising features of religion. In the place of the experience of the Christ's Kingdom, versions of utopia motivate human efforts to achieve the ideal proposed as potentially satisfying. A different kind of *ex nihilo* creativity has emerged in the aggressive secularism of the Western world. But the rebelliousness that this reveals is ultimately part and parcel of our ancestral propensity for pride and idolatry, namely, living and thinking in accordance with the mode of the created in its fallen state, with the order destined to death and decay.

5.

The question of the ecclesial event, interpreted as an "existential fact," will make Yannaras' contribution decisively different

22. "The West never understood the Greek version of politics as a 'struggle to attain truth,' nor did it become aware of the historical continuity of this struggle in the 'parish' or 'community' of the Greco-Roman world or *oikoumene,* or even to some extent during the centuries of the *Tourkokratia*." Christos Yannaras and Norman Russell, 118.

than Heidegger's and most definitely original. What remains truly instructive in Yannaras' reworking of Heidegger, as well as other modern and contemporary references, resides in the potential of the Christian Hellenic matrix to redeploy conceptual vocabulary that does not have *strictu sensus* a Christian meaning into a viable proposal for Orthodox thought for the present times. Otherwise expressed, his relational ontology, along with the theological and ecclesial implications that it entails, represents a credible alternative to the Heideggerian version that inspired him. It thus reveals something about the transformative quality of Christianised Hellenism and its sense of wholeness and yearning for communion that dictate the criteria of truth. Yannaras' creative efforts thus mirror the work of the Church Fathers in regard to the paganized culture with which they were dialogically engaged; the result was the use of pagan philosophy in ways that at the same time undermined it. [23] Thus, to Heidegger's "*nihilist ontology*," Yannaras opposes his own "*personalist ontology* of the Christian ecclesial tradition."[24] A distinguishing factor that might be useful in highlighting the significance in being effected in the change of perspective that he introduces can be seen around the theme of

23. If there is a problem in Yannaras' use of Heidegger for his own Orthodox purposes, it lies in its over-reliance on the Heideggerian sense of the existential that ends up having a Sartrian connotation, namely, a rejection or predetermined essences in favour of existence as a personal project (ascetical, self-transcending) outwards to the eventfulness of relational life. The strong personalist emphasis tends to sideline the goodness of the created (albeit) fallen order. Perhaps here too, he follows too closely Heidegger's early stress on fallenness, under the influence Kierkegaard and, very arguably, Luther. But this topic, however interesting, would take us far afield, so we shall only make a note of it here.
24. Christos Yannaras, *The Enigma of Evil* translated by Norman Russell (Brookline, Ma.: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2012), 128. Yannaras' italics.

apophaticism, central to the Orthodox tradition and advanced, in his own way, by Heidegger.

For Yannaras, Heidegger's version is fundamentally an "apophaticism of essence," meaning that we might assent to the essence of an entity whose existence we might conceive in ontic terms, but its ontological dimension cannot be known and, thereby, cannot be participated in. In *Postmodern Metaphysics*, Yannaras would identify this kind of apophaticism as it was developed in the Western metaphysical tradition and quite manifest in contemporary thought as "unorthodox"; lacking ontological participation in that which is radically given to be known as experienced, it remains prey to relativism and nihilism. In contrast, "apophaticism of the person" would bring decidedly in line with Orthodoxy and its relational ontology, founded on the sense that any and all that is real is constituted by relationality, the scope of which cannot be fully articulated in conceptual terms. But it can be approached experientially. "Thus, if God exists, he is primarily known as a person (*hypostasis*) in the immediacy of relationship, and not primarily as an essence with its conceptual definition."[25] The participatory dimension is assured in the very process of awareness in which all factual knowledge implies realised relationships, involving the knowing subject capable of otherness, i.e., capable of relationship, all of which speaks of the real possibilities for humankind contained in the ecclesial event, the communal synaxis, a renewed and enhanced ontology for humankind. From this what comes to the fore is the primacy of modes of relationality and the differentiated modes of intelligibility that they may

25. Christos Yannaras, *On the Absence and Unknowability of God: Heidegger and the Areopagite* translated by Haralambos Ventis (London: T&T Clark, 2005), 29.

produce. It also goes *pari passu* with the rehabilitation of Palamas' insistence on the real distinction between essence and energy that the West refuses accept. "The West is unaware that the essence is a *mode*, the mode simply becomes active (*energeistai*) and that it is active without the activity (*energeia*) replacing or annihilating the identity of the one acting."[26] Along with the inherent interest that the Palamite thesis possesses, it has the additional merit of aligning itself more readily with the dynamics of the divine and human relationality, implying the kenosis of God's saving acts and the human will to receive them or not.

While Yannaras' approach to ontological difference, to that which distinguishes an ontology of eventfulness from definable ontic structures, consciously following Heidegger, it also recreates the circumstance for a response to a reality that is precisely unknowable yet eminently present. In so doing, he crucially deploys the Palamite distinguishing of essence and energy, on which the Orthodox sense of the apophatic ultimately depends, not only to accentuate the philosophical roots of the Schism, but also to recover the existential authenticity of life in Christ. In sum, for Yannaras, the key for Orthodoxy and its peculiar rationality lies in the struggle to attain freedom by assuming the fundamental ontological given of the immediacy of relationality and engaging in the process of attainment in conjunction with the uncreated energies that lift humankind into a godly, deified existence, overcoming decay and corruption that characterises a purely natural mode of existence.

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26. Christos Yannaras and Norman Russell, *Metaphysics as a Personal Adventure,* 107.

6.

The yearning for Truth coincides with Life delivered from the evil of death. "Truth is the reality which does not contradict itself – the final truth is life which is not affected by death." [27] The rule of thumb regarding the ontological difference at work here sees the ontic as referring at once to the biological and to the amplitude of human culture; they represent the necessary presuppositions for human being, but do not constitute its full reality. In fact, they exist under the sign of death, i.e., evil, the Fall. The fullness of human reality will entail an existential transposition into an ontological dimension, one that literally defines the expression "ontology," i.e., the *logos* of its being, the underlying "logic" which cannot but be relational and desirous of such a freedom that ultimately does not find death truly natural, at least for human being. Rationality will thus be necessarily relational and as such in quest of a response to the demand for freedom, wherein its sense of morality becomes newly defined in terms of reciprocity and self-transcendence, the ontological expression of which *is* the Church and her experience. Yannaras' insistence on "Church experience," "ecclesial event," and ecclesial language and hermeneutic accentuates the Church's unique knowledge of that which was given to her to know and to expound upon. The event as such suggests a regeneration of that which would be otherwise lost to death but also a dispensation of grace that, having come with the Incarnation, intensifies the Creator God's involvement with the creation and introduces the theosis factor: henceforth and in Trinitarian language, deification is communicated to human persons as a personal donation

27. Christos Yannaras, *Elements of Faith* translated by Keith Schram (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991), 150.

of the Holy Spirit, as the effective adoption of God the Father in and through Christ, His divine Son.[28] Liberated from all manner of natural essentialism, theosis is, as Yannaras appreciates it, the ek-static assumption of living in accordance with the mode of the uncreated; it inserts itself into the order of the real, not to be primarily conceptualised and systematised, i.e. as religionised, but rather to be celebrated, in *ecclesia,* as a metaphysical experience for those who engage and struggle with it.

> What *saves* human beings and *deifies* them is not their individual ethical achievements, their feats of individual virtue, their heroic asceticism, or their pre-eminence in the struggle against the flesh. What *saves* and *deifies* them is participation in the Church, in the *mode* of the Church (the ecclesial community). The *mode* of Christ, who enfleshed (made the *mode* of humanity) the *mode* of triadic love: that human beings too should exist by drawing their existence not from their *nature*, which is subject to necessities, but should exist because they love and are loved. The salvation/ deification of a human being is not an achievement of the individual; it is an

28. The first chapter of Second Epistle of Saint Peter presents the doctrine of deification as involving at once the saving acts that come through Christ and the active participation of the saved who have been given "exceedingly great and precious promises." Through these, they are called to "be partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust (1:4)." In his "Introduction" to the Selected Works of Saint Maximus the Confessor (Mahwar, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1985), Jaroslav Pelikan makes the pertinent point of how difficult it had been for Western theology, both Roman Catholic and Protestant, influenced by the anti-Pelagian position of Saint Augustine, to formulate the necessary conjugation of divine grace and human effort, or *ascesis*. The paradox that Maximus' spiritual theology seeks to resolve resumes in the correlation between the fullness of the Incarnation and man's part in the process of his own deification, and thereby the degree of realisation in consequence of God becoming man.

> ecclesial gift. With the Church a human being realises the *mode* of Christ, the making flesh of the *mode* of triadic love.
>
> [...] Consequently, the salvation/ *theosis* that we look for is not unlimited survival as individuals, but the *wholeness* (the *pleroma*, or fullness) of every loving relation that, in the mode of the created, we live in a fragmentary, deficient way [...]. [29]

The rising above the mode of the created is tantamount to struggling to belong to the Church, which, in turn, sustains and gives Christ-like form to human lives and the effective participation in the uncreated. That is, the uncreated mode of Christ assumes the created mode of humanity and raises it into the mode of the Triadic God, namely, that of reciprocity of hypostatic love of Persons in a common divine nature. Therein, the primal expression of the mode of the Church, the wholeness of which both precedes and anticipates the engaging of humankind in the process of salvation and deification – namely, that which ultimately constitutes its Good News and the reason for being of creation; the demands inherent in the relational and synergetic ontology, advanced by Yannaras, coincide with the catholicity of salvation in Christ and represents a decision to move toward communion and eternal well-being.

The equation, established between the ecclesial event and an ontology suggests that both the actuality of the reality being communicated and the experience that exceeds in its content that which can be physically/ ontically contemplated. It gives rise to an interpersonal bonding, especially cultivated in the theological poetics of the liturgy.

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29. Christos Yannaras and Norman Russell, *Metaphysics as a Personal Search,* 102-103.

> From the liturgical cycle of the Church's services (vespers, matins, the Liturgy, the hours) theology became a poem and a song – experienced more that thought out by syllogistic inferences. Initiation into the truth of the Church is participated in her way of life, in a festive gathering of the faithful, in the visible actualisation and revelation of the new humanity which has conquered death.[30]

The lived ontology of the Church involves temporal events that nevertheless reach beyond themselves in a double sense: their ontological import is universal, i.e., they are not confined to the moment of their happening but are conveyed in and through the life of the Church to the human beings at all times; and they are transformative of the reality that they touch such that existence itself is regenerated.

7.

The criteria for the kind of rationality that Yannaras proposes from within the dynamics of Orthodox Christianity and its claims of establishing the parameters of right-thinking before the apostolic experience of the Incarnate God cannot be readily separated from the history about where it was rejected outright, or where it was distorted, or where it was guided into paths such that what remains as its legitimate expression stands in need of recuperation for the sake of truth. For this reason, the strictly speaking philosophical proposals, involving manifestly epistemological and ontological questions, are argued for alongside reconstructive readings of historical developments and ideological fixations. To some degree, the philosophical issues may be detached from

30. Christos Yannaras, *Elements of Faith,* 18.

the historical ones. Yet the sense of struggle is a common theme in patristic literature, one that Yannaras clearly makes his as well. It is intrinsic to rationality, as he conceives it, and has its reason for being in its endeavour to render more consistent the personal life that it bears and that is borne by it. This would be the case of the Church before the task of explicating the reality of Christ in its wholeness, i.e., its catholicity, entailing a discerning of more partial versions of it, i.e., its heresies.

> The event and the experience of catholicity precede the theoretical formulations – the theoretical formulations are provoked by heresies; these require the Church to express in definite formulations the experience of her truth. The rightness of the truth and of the faith precede both chronologically and essentially. It is assured by sharing in the experience of the catholic Church and simply covering of the boundaries of its defence are in its intellectual formulation.[31]

In other words and finally, the rightness of truth concerning faith, i.e., its orthodoxy, takes as its criterion the catholicity that is realised and manifested wherever Christians gather around the Eucharist, confessing with one heart and mind the full reality of Christ and the communion of saints to be celebrated at anytime. This would be – conceivably – the proper *situs* for the *Philokalia* and what the West still can, in a way that must be appropriate to itself, and for itself, be with a properly dimensioned understanding of the writings. But if at all a viable hope, the primacy of the ecclesial experience will most likely be a port of arrival than a point of departure for the contemporary seeker imbued with a modern cast of mind

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31. Christos Yannaras, *Elements of Faith,* 151.

and will for emancipation. In this case, the *Philokalia* can be, and often has been, a privileged point of departure that deserves its status as a classical expression of Christian spirituality, a guide to freedom for those who seek the Kingdom that is always already at hand in the Church, the life-transforming Body of Christ.